

A Response from Sarah Coakley*

This report from a specially-gathered group of American theologians, both “traditionalist” and “liberal,” and ably and charitably chaired by Professor Ellen Charry, is greatly to be welcomed. It raises the currently divisive discussion of same-sex desire in the Anglican Communion to a new level of theological clarity and mutual courtesy, and for those traits alone it deserves wide ecclesial attention and reflection. Not the least of its merits is its incisive clarification of what might be called the “meta-theological” presumptions that divide the two parties. These divisions are not overcome in the report—far from it, as the Responses reveal; but the fact that the hermeneutical, theological, scientific, and spiritual divergences are so clearly excavated means that—potentially—the next step could be an even deeper negotiation of what R. G. Collingwood (in *The Idea of Metaphysics*) famously called “absolute presuppositions.” The problem with “absolute presuppositions” is that they are often so deep, and so deeply held, as to be rendered invisible; the abrogation of them, then, tends to cause initial emotive ripostes until they can be brought into the realm of rational reflection. This report fearlessly digs down until each “spade is turned,” and tells us what is to be found there.

The two positions are, however, not at all *égal* in their choices of approach. While the traditionalists provide a commendably clear, but somewhat predictable, account of their own biblical and natural law reasons for classing homosexuality as a “disorder” and an effect of sin, the liberals take a most creative and original line (owing much to Eugene Rogers’s earlier work in this area). It is not surprising that the traditionalists in their Response are somewhat thrown, if not affronted, by this new liberal approach. For in truth, it has little to do with what is normally called “liberalism” in America, whether in the context of politics or of theology, and many liberal supporters of gays

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and lesbians in our churches might hardly know what to do with these moves. In my short response to the report, then, I choose to comment on this seismic shift and its potential theological and spiritual significance for the future of our church's life.

The insistent emphasis of the liberals' approach in this document is that marriage (whether heterosexual or same-sex) is an *ascetical* and lifelong undertaking, not only for the good of the couple concerned but for the life of the church and of the world. Marriage is in this sense a "martyrdom"—a witness, both suffering and joyful, to the life of Christ, and to Christ's love of the body, his church. This line of thinking in the document takes us back not only to Ephesians 5, but it reinterprets Romans 9–11 to construe same-sex relationships (in marriage) as being "grafted" into the old order, as the Gentiles were into the life of Israel. This latter exegetical move is clearly controversial and question-begging, and immediately becomes a sticking point for the traditionalists, as we might expect. However, it is important to stress that the core argument about christologically-motivated asceticism is not dependent on this particular hermeneutical ploy. In fact, if this line of argument were taken seriously, then it would demand of the Episcopal Church a serious rethinking of its currently relaxed attitude to divorce, even as it simultaneously included the celebration of same-sex marriage and a reconsideration of the value of celibacy (for those called to it). Liberal attitudes, as more commonly understood, would be challenged by this line of thinking at various levels. For example, from this perspective one could not argue for the acceptance of same-sex relationships on the basis of "rights," or the "pursuit of happiness"; promiscuity and unfaithfulness would be seen as the "disorder" destabilizing the church and society, not same-sex desire. Leniency and laxness, on the other hand, would be contrasted with the demand for the "arduous discipline" (p. 51) of marriage, only sustained by grace. The "glue" of society, so weakened by serial faithless relationships and broken marriages, would be reconsidered from a demanding christological perspective.

It is striking that the traditionalists' response to such a set of ascetic ideas (arguably more "traditional" than the traditionalists!) contains a renewed attack on *eros* itself, one reminiscent of the work of Anders Nygren: "There is *eros* galore turned toward degrading, violent, and abusive purposes. Talk of *eros* must always have the doctrine of original sin near at hand" (p. 98).

Let me suggest that the real theological *novum* in this document is the liberals' call to a major rethinking of the church's ideas about desire and love (and their relation)—*prior* to any decision about same-sex relationships. *Of course* “the doctrine of original sin [is] always near at hand.” That does not mean, however, that *eros* is not capable of divine use, acceptance, and transformation. At the level of “absolute presuppositions” this matter of the theological status of *eros* is probably the most pressing question for the church's theological life today. I welcome this report's excavation of this issue: it helps us see that the erotic crisis in the church is one for us all.

